

BOMB

Yorgos Lanthimos

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Source: *BOMB*, Spring 2016, No. 135 (Spring 2016), pp. 150-159

Published by: New Art Publications

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24878955>

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150 Colin Farrell as David in *The Lobster*, 2015. Images courtesy of Alchemy.

Much has been made of the recent renaissance in Greek cinema and one of its most prominent directors is Yorgos Lanthimos, especially since his second feature, *Dogtooth* (2009), introduced the wider world to his askew vision.

Mr. Lanthimos's fourth film, *The Lobster* (2015), is a devious reflection on the social constructs of relationships. In a parallel society, single men and women are obliged to couple within an allotted time period or risk being irreversibly turned into an animal of their choice. Notions of compatibility rapidly descend into satire and the characters eventually revolt. That *The Lobster* provokes audiences into finding their own allegories shouldn't be surprising. The film reminded a Hungarian friend of former communist years, specifically the matter-of-fact nature of absurd policies and forced clapping over bullshit achievements.

The fate of a foreign Oscar nominee can result in tears once the razzmatazz has receded, yet *The Lobster* marks a triumphant shift in scale. Ironically, I recently declined to pitch for an American version of *Dogtooth*, fearing that remaking a film by a peer was akin to cheating with a friend's partner. Maybe because of my abstinence, the Hellenic director asked me to interview him for this article. Besides hearing more about *The Lobster*, I was also introduced to the works of Nikos Papatakis and Alexis Damianos, which proves that I'm not the prized pundit on Greek cinema I thought I was. —*Peter Strickland*



152 Colin Farrell and Rachel Weisz as Short-Sighted Woman in *The Lobster*.



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PETER STRICKLAND One of the many things I admire about *The Lobster* is that I can't really place it near any other film. Someone mentioned Luis Buñuel, but I didn't quite see that. The one connection that I made was Antonin Artaud and the Theater of Cruelty. I liked how the film just came out of nowhere.

YORGOS LANTHIMOS That's a great compliment because I'm striving to make something different, but not for the sake of making something different. Obviously, we have all these images and influences, most of which can be completely unconscious. And I'm trying to honor that but at the same time avoid doing something similar. It's very common to explain films by comparing them to other films. That's how people understand films, I think, or are able to talk about them.

PS If I look back at my teenage years when I had no sense of film history—that's when films had the biggest impact. It might be a combination of having no sense of history and also just being at an age when you're very perceptive. But then I've been kind of numbed over the years, and it's hard to come to something fresh. Everything has its trail of influences.

The Lobster is quite a brutal view of how society influences or constricts love—

YL Or provides the structure you have to operate within in order to succeed or be happy.

PS Yeah, I guess *love* is not the word, maybe settling down—

YL Yes. (*laughter*)

PS Someone mentioned Franz Kafka, which you must have heard many times, not just about *The Lobster*, but about your other works too. I'm based in Hungary now, and it's interesting how people view Kafka in Central and Eastern Europe. They don't see his work as surreal or absurd. They see him as a social realist; they can see how these things happen. But if you've never lived

under any kind of autocratic system, the bureaucracy just looks so confounding and bizarre. Greece obviously has a very different history—I'm not trying to make any direct links—but it's no coincidence that many of the greatest absurdists come from countries that have these regimes: Eugène Ionesco from Romania, Kafka from what is now the Czech Republic, and a lot of the Russians.

YL That's the interesting thing with interaction between cultures and how people perceive things. People make those remarks about your work and sometimes you're trying to explain that the film's reality is only slightly skewed or slightly enhanced. And then people think that you're joking. But that's the way I've experienced it or perceived it. It's fascinating to see how people view work that springs from another culture.

And then transporting it into another culture. I'm obviously Greek, but I made this film in English, and—well, I don't know what the film's ethnicity is—it was shot in Ireland. The cast is from all around the world, which was intentional because the whole story just felt right being something contemporary and close to the societies that we live in, that I live in.

PS My grandparents in Greece had an arranged marriage and what you see in *The Lobster* is only a few degrees further from that. How did you choose the actors?

YL Because it is a contemporary film in English and it takes place in a society now or slightly in the future or however you want to see it or call it, I could choose actors from any country. I could just think of people I wanted to work with. It was a relatively easy process, and I was lucky because they were very supportive and committed.

This was my first film made under different conditions and that was difficult for me. I made all my previous films in Greece with just a few friends trying to put some money together (our own money) and most of them didn't get paid or only got paid very little. We just had the absolutely necessary stuff—we

were asking for favors, shooting in friends' houses, borrowing equipment, props, clothes—that kind of situation.

So making my first film within an industry, with financing—and a crew that views what they do as a proper job (who want to finish at a certain time and go home, to whom one film may mean nothing more than the next)—that was a difficult situation to get into. Having strong support from the actors was really helpful throughout the process. Their instincts were great, they understood the material, and nobody came in having a completely different idea of what this was supposed to be. Not that we ever discussed what it was supposed to be... I mean, you say a few basic things like, "This is how I like to work. I don't want to discuss too much about the meaning of things or characters or backgrounds or how you're supposed to do this—is that okay with you?" And then you hope it will work out.

PS That's interesting. So it's more reactive with the actors. Rather than feeding them information, you just give them the situation and they react to that.

YL Yeah, but the script has quite a voice of its own, so it's hard to think of something completely different and not fitting. I'm sure there are cases like that, and I will hopefully encounter them again, as I have in the past, but this time around it just worked out very organically and naturally. "Let's go do it and see how it comes out. And then we can work on that and tweak or shift things in this or the other direction."

Also we had no time to rehearse because the actors were from all over the world. We didn't have the time or the money to get them there for days of rehearsals before we started filming. It was very fortunate that it worked out the way it did.

PS It's a famously difficult step for a "continental" European filmmaker—or in general, a director who's not English, American or Australian—to make a film that is considered Western. Throughout the history of film, there have been

many failed attempts by highly regarded “foreign” film directors to move over to Hollywood. Obviously you pulled it off very well, but were you fearful of that big step up, and its traps?

YL I think most of the cases that you’re referring to are of filmmakers who entered situations in which they didn’t have the same control over their work that they did when making films back home. I came into a new place trying to create the circumstances to make films almost the same way that I used to in Greece, only with a bit more support. You create the scale of the film and surround yourself with people who know you as a filmmaker, who will maintain the essence of your previous work and try to transport that to your new projects.

With *The Lobster*, we had a screenplay that I wrote with Efthymis Filippou, the same writer that I had worked with before—on *Dogtooth* (2009) and on *A/ps* (2011)—and we had absolute control over it, of course. You know, we listened to suggestions or notes or whatever, but the whole process was very respectful toward the filmmaker, and I think that’s important.

PS I suppose it also helped that you made three films prior to *The Lobster*.

YL Right after *Dogtooth*—which I guess was the film that made the most noise and was nominated for an Oscar and all those things that we never expected—we just tried to go make our next film, *A/ps*, as quickly as possible without noticing all that stuff around *Dogtooth*. And that was quite helpful. We didn’t have much support for making it, but we filmed it before we were nominated for the Oscar for *Dogtooth*. The nomination didn’t change our attitude toward how we were making the film, what people might expect us to do next, and all the things that can confuse you and start pushing you in directions that you aren’t intending to go in.

PS I grew up in the UK and there was this myth that Hollywood was full of sharks. I thought the European art house thing was this golden utopia.

But actually there can be just as many sharks in the art house world.

It’s interesting how you use existing music in *The Lobster*. You give us a great variety—Alfred Schnittke, Richard Strauss, Igor Stravinsky.

YL I always had real trouble when I was trying to use music in my films. My previous films don’t have music in the traditional sense of a soundtrack. Although I love music and admire people who are able to use music in their films, in my own work, adding music always seemed to narrow the sense of a scene or the entirety of the film. Instead of opening up more possibilities and nuances and ways that the scene could feel or be perceived, for me, music always did exactly the opposite.

PS I agree. It is a problem.

YL But while writing the screenplay for *The Lobster* and having the first images in my head, I thought that this could be the first film in which I would finally be able to use music. It was instinctive. I started imagining those Hitchcock-kind of images—Colin Farrell and Rachel Weisz running in the fields like a *North by Northwest* sort of thing. So I thought, if I’m using music, then it should be really present and become a new and tonally different layer in the scene.

PS The music feels like punctuation or a determined distraction. It doesn’t usually emote—a few times it does, like when they’re using the hand signals, a wonderful scene. But in other moments, it does feel abrasive, which is good. You use music very differently from other directors.

YL I was trying to add something other than what the scene was doing itself, something that might even be in the exact opposite direction of the scene. Instead of reassuring the scene with a related kind of music, both of them together created something new, something that wasn’t there before.

It’s tricky to fit music into a duration and then to get out of it.

PS The getting out is very tough. I’m not a big fan of music that emotes, so in my work, we try not to have music in the emotional scenes. I saw *Son of Saul*, which I believe has no music, and there’s still something very musical about the way that film is put together, the whole rhythm of it. A film can be musical without having any music in it.

YL Yeah, that’s true. At some point I thought that I would have a composer do the music for *The Lobster*, but then I started using recordings of all this classical stuff. And I did get attached.

Voiceover was another tool that I used similarly to music. Voiceover brings this other element to the scenes—sometimes contradictory to and sometimes supportive of what was going on. And music on top of or under the voiceover created another layer that heightened the sense of the scene.

PS It was interesting that you used Rachel Weisz as a voiceover before she actually appears, much later in the film. Usually one hears voiceovers either from a narrator that you never see or from the lead character.

YL In the first part of the film, it can play as a narrator who provides a distance to the film, and is able to comment on it in a certain way. But the twist is that you actually get to meet the female narrator in the second half. In the beginning there was the idea that it could be the voice of the maid, reading the diary she found to the Loner Leader, but that turned out to be too confusing.

PS I wish I hadn’t read about the film before seeing it, because when I saw the opening where the woman shoots a donkey—

YL I’ve had people sending me emails, trying to decode that.

PS I just saw it as an introduction to the world. Here’s a cheating husband, who ends up divorced, gets turned into a donkey, and then she goes to get revenge on him. Probably she gets the wrong donkey, probably her husband is the other donkey that survives. That’s



156 (i) Colin Farrell and Rachel Weisz, (ii) Léa Seydoux as Loner Leader.

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(iii) Colin Farrell and John C. Reilly as *Lisping Man*, (iv) Rachel Weisz, Colin Farrell, Léa Seydoux, and Michael Smiley as *Loner Swimmer*.
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Instead of reassuring the scene with a related kind of music, both of them together created something new, something that wasn't there before.

the sequel to *The Lobster*, there you go. (laughter)

YL I like starting a film like that—you set the tone but you don't explain or go back to it. When the film finishes, the viewer can return to the beginning if they want and give their own interpretation.

PS Usually in films, there's a sense of what the characters did next in your head, but with *The Lobster*, one wonders what happened before. You make up these stories in your head when you see the flamingo in the woods—you just sort of wonder, Who was that person? I liked that the animals were never pointed out, they were just there in the background. You never did a close-up of them.

YL It was quite a conscious decision that they shouldn't be turned into a showcase of, "Look at what kinds of animals we have around the forest." Instead, I wanted them to just naturally be part of the world. It was funny selecting them, though—you know, seeing what kind of strange animals we could find in Ireland during that time. There was a camel—

PS Oh, the camel. That was great. I'm half Greek, but I didn't grow up in Greece. What was your experience starting out as a filmmaker in Greece?

YL The general notion of becoming a filmmaker, especially when I was growing up, was that it was an absurd thing. There weren't many filmmakers or many films being made in Greece. It wasn't considered a proper or serious thing to do; it was seen as a hobby. So there was no infrastructure or support for younger people to go into filmmaking. I basically went to film school to learn the craft of commercials, which seemed like a thing you could do to earn a living.

But, of course, as soon as you enter film school, you start seeing all these great works and get acquainted with all those great filmmakers. When I was young, I kept in the back of my mind that, though it seemed impossible to make films in Greece anytime

soon, at some point I would like to. I worked on commercials for many years, and, technically speaking, it was the best schooling for me because I met a lot of people and developed a lot of experience and confidence. At some point I went, "It doesn't matter that we don't have money, support, or a proper infrastructure, we can make a film with nothing. Just get a camera and a couple of actors and do it. We can pay for it through our commercials." That led us to make our first films in Greece—completely independently. We just did whatever the hell came to our heads. That was liberating and, at the same time, constricting because we could only do so much with five people, the little money that we could invest into the films, and the number of favors we could ask of people. But it meant that creatively we were completely free. We just made the films that we wanted to make, aside from a few logistical compromises that were necessary to keep the filming affordable. So that's my short story of going from commercials to making *Kinetta* (2005), my first film. And then *Dogtooth*.

PS *Kinetta* has just come out on Second Run DVD, in the UK at least.

YL Yeah, it's great to see the first official DVD of *Kinetta* coming out because it wasn't properly released anywhere. In Greece, we just had a private distribution in one small cinema. But it got shown in a lot of festivals, and that made us confident that people somehow appreciated what we did. It gave us the strength to do the next one. More people helped to make *Dogtooth*, but again the circumstances were similar: a few friends, very little money. We just kept on making what we felt we wanted to make.

Then I made *A/ps*, same conditions, and it was just as difficult. After making those three films in Greece under such circumstances, I decided to move to England. I felt that, in order to progress and evolve, I needed to have a little bit more than what we had in Greece. Many things change when you enter a new situation—how you make films, what kinds of people are involved,

and the types of difficulties that you encounter. There might not be the same financial problems, although there often are anyway because you don't end up doing a huge film all of a sudden. And you don't want to. I mean, I didn't want to suddenly be doing a huge film that I would lose creative control over.

PS I know. That's scary.

YL It's important to keep the essence of your kind of filmmaking, the one that made you want to start making films.

PS Do you miss the speed of the old days? With my first film, although the postproduction took forever, the actual shooting was very fast—seventeen days. With fewer people, you can move around much more quickly, and so on.

YL Yeah, we tried to keep the same spirit in *The Lobster*. Altogether there were more people involved, but the core crew was small. We didn't use any lights; we just had a camera and the actors so we could move quite fast. The actors were pleasantly surprised with that too because they didn't have to wait for the next setup. It was like, Okay, we did this, let's do this other shot while you are on set. That part of filmmaking I try to maintain as much as I can, even while entering a bigger structure: have as few people as possible on set, try to move fast, and just use what's necessary in order to get what's important from the scene and not deal with all the peripheral things.

PS I first heard of you through Panos Koutras, quite a few years ago. He and I had a shared interest in this street called Menandrou. I had a partner who lived there, and in the '90s, when I spent the most time there, it was populated by transgender prostitutes. *Strella*, Panos's film from 2009, had a similar feel to it.

It's just funny that when I got into cinema, in terms of Greece, the names I can think of—obviously there was Theo Angelopoulos; there was Mihalīs Kakogiannis; all those musicals with Sotiris Moustakas, which I actually really miss. But there wasn't much else. There was someone who broke through

outside of Greece with that film in the late '90s called *From the Edge of the City*—

YL Yes, Constantine Giannaris.

PS I remember seeing it in London, but there was never any follow-up. But of course we had *Singapore Sling* by Nikos Nikolaidis in 1990—that was a big cult hit.

Suddenly, the press was talking about this so-called "Greek wave" with mainly you and Athina Rachel Tsangari and Panos Koutras.

YL People feel the need to identify certain periods, countries, and territories in cinema. I don't know the root of the desire to discover something like a wave or a movement. Certainly the filmmakers themselves cannot identify it. We just make the films we want to make and try to progress, and then it's the other people's job to speak about that.

But what I think is very positive is that there are many more films being made in Greece now with the advance of technology and thanks to the sudden attention to Greek films. Greek films are very different from films produced in other countries. I don't think they actually belong to a movement or, as we would say, a certain kind of cinema with similar characteristics. I think there are just very distinct filmmakers in Greece, each with their own unique voice.

Have you ever seen the films of Nikos Papatakis?

PS No.

YL I'm obsessed with him lately, and I'm just speaking about him all the time. He made *The Shepherds of Calamity* in 1967 and *The Photograph* in 1986. They're both brilliant films. He lived in France and he was a very interesting personality. He produced Cassavetes's first film, *Shadows*. And he produced Jean Genet's—the short film in jail—what's it called?

PS Oh, *Un chant d'amour*.

YL Yeah, so he's quite a figure. I

recently watched Angelopoulos's first film—

PS *The Traveling Players*?

YL No, *Reconstruction*, from 1970, which is absolutely amazing. You see how and why these filmmakers started to be known more internationally. They are very distinct voices. Like Nikos Nikolaidis, they're here and there and they pop up in the history of cinema. But it's also hard to find those films. So you should look up Nikos Papatakis.

PS I will. Do you see yourself making a film in Greek again? Or in Greece?

YL For the moment, I'm developing projects that are in English and they're taking place in locations other than Greece. But you never know what the next idea might be. It's not likely to be possible to make films in Greece in the way that I want to make them now, so it wouldn't be the natural next step. But if there's any idea or a story or something that takes me back there, then I have absolutely no objection to doing that. I don't have a long-term plan. We finish a film, we're trying to write a new one or a couple of new ones, in order to have an alternative—because you never know which one is going to go next. Or maybe those don't end up getting made, and then I might just go, Why don't I do this thing that I had thought of long ago, and it's in Greece, and it's going to be easier to do it with my friends again.

PS Well, if you shoot in Greece again, at least the catering is world-class.